Rhode Island College Public Art Selection Panel Meeting

Friday, March 28, 2008

9:45 AM – 2:00 PM

One Capital Hill, Third Floor

Providence, RI 02908

Re: Presentations by artist finalists and final selection of Public Art proposals for the New Residence Hall at Rhode Island College

Present

Panel: J Hogue, Steve Hughes, John Nazarian, Carolyn Peck,

Artists: Alan Binstock, Susan Cooper, Cork Marcheschi (via speaker phone), Phil Napala, Ben Phipps

RISCA Staff: Cristina DiChiera, Liz Keithline, Randall Rosenbaum

Other: John Mallilo

Not Present: Sarah Coutermanche

Cristina DiChiera provided an initial orientation to the panel. The charge of the panel is to select a proposal for RI College among the four proposals. The other important charge of the panel is to ask all of the questions that the RISCA Council might want to ask –

addressing issues such as installation techniques, safety issues, durability, etc. Now is the time to ask these artists any question that could possibly be put to them in order to fully understand their proposals. She also thanked the artists for the hard work they had put into the process thus far and for agreeing to allow their fellow artists to respectfully witness all of the presentations.

Ben Phipps – Ben is a RI native living in CA. He began his presentation by showing some of his past work. He creates his artwork by recycling plastic materials, which he sources from industries that dispose of large amounts of unused plastics. He molds these plastics into thin sheets of color, which form the basis of his designs. The visual appeal of his work is partnered with the benefit of the reduced impact on the environment of its materials and production process. He has connections with local manufacturers who he would work with on this project – reflecting the LEED principle of sourcing materials and labor from within 500 miles of the site and highlighting the LEED compliance of the building. In considering the content of his proposal, he wanted to address the culture and programs of the college. RIC has strong departments in nursing and performing arts, which he sees as related to the combination of making fine art from recycled industrial materials through unique engineering processes – bringing together or "bridging the gap between" science/engineering and art/aesthetics. The plastics in his work all filter light, creating various textures, colors, shades, and reflections. He has partnered with local

manufacturers and fabricators including Sheffield plastics of Sheffield, MA, which takes raw resin and converts it into the plastic sheets that he works from. Then they apply a poly carbonate hard coat which keeps the plastic from scratching and strengthens it. UVEX in Smithfield, a company he used to work for, has agreed to donate the plastics he will use for the project. LTI SmartGlass will do his lamination in Massachusetts. His compositions of colored plastic sheets is sandwiched between other substrates of plastics and polycarbonate through an autoclave – a device that uses elevated temperatures and pressure to create thick plastic panels. Also, a leading manufacturer of lasers and dyes in New Jersey will provide some materials and services. (All local partners, materials suppliers and manufacturers are listed on pg 3 of his presentation).

Ben presented two possible proposals – one for the stairwell and one for the front courtyard. For the courtyard proposal he would partner with the Steelyard and for both proposals he would set up a studio in Providence to fabricate the work. His overall goal is to create visual art that plays with color, light and space, yet is also intellectual and will elevate the viewer's appreciation of science. He wants to place art installations nationwide that bridge the gap between art and science. He uses his contacts as an engineer to recycle industrial materials and turn them into art. He has worked with optics companies in RI, leading him to understand the dynamics of light manipulation. At Uvex, he witnessed hundreds of lbs of plastics being thrown away and was driven to figure out a way to sculpt with

that material. Thin film diffraction, optical interference, dichroic coatings are all techniques that are being used in the optics industry within a scientific context, but art not being used to make art. He's been using these dynamics and materials to create work for public and private spaces and he has patented some of the processes he uses. He often buys used equipment to do his work, thereby expanding the environmental benefit.

1) The front courtyard seemed like an obvious open space for artwork. He proposed placing modular units throughout the courtyard. He felt that one piece would be out of place in that space. The multiple units could spread across the courtyard and tie into the space. As the viewer moves through the courtyard they could appreciate the pieces from various angles and with changing light reflections. The optical effect would be stimulating and dynamic, changing throughout the day. Optical prisms and solar panels would be mounted in the tops of the panels so the pieces would glow at night as well.

2) The stairwells would be converted into Stairwell Lanterns. He has worked for weeks to gain the approval of the RI Fire Marshall for this proposal and is still working to obtain final approval. He would install his laminated plastic panels within the central empty space of the stairwell. No two panels would be identical, creating a progression of original pieces as you travel up and down the stairs, as well as two cohesive pieces – one in each stairwell. The panels would create the effect of textured stained glass throughout the stairwell. His proposal

specs and plans have detailed schematics of how the pieces will be bolted into the framework of the stairwell, behind the wire mesh. These are not fire stairs – but LED emergency lights could be mounted along the back concrete wall to help illuminate the panels.

Questions – there is overall concern about the potential of student vandalism to destroy artwork. The outside proposal is more susceptible to vandalism. Ben suggested that the panels in the stairwell could be set up against the wire mesh or they could be set back about 3 inches to make it more difficult to damage them. The poly carbonate hard coat is abrasion and chemical resistant. If you put the piece right up against the mesh, it could be cleaned. The most the students could do is marker the panels. The poly carbonate hard coat will keep the panels from being scratched. The process of making them is the same as the process for making bullet proof glass. The panels on the interior or exterior could also be replaced if necessary. You could not kick these panels in and if they were broken, the laminate would keep them from shattering. In accordance with the RI fire codes, the materials are rated class A in both smoke density and flame rate. However, Ben would provide the Fire Marshall with tests that demonstrate the safety of the materials. The light sources would not be battery operated, but would have battery back up.

Phil Napala and Alan Binstock - Alan is receiving an award for sustainable site development. Phil is retired from NASA. Phil used

the example of a chunk the size of RI falling off the polar ice shelf to emphasize the need for reducing carbon emissions. Their proposal for RIC deals with the issue of sustainability. They presented a sculpture of the letter R, which could represent renew, rethink, Rhode Island, etc. The piece incorporates a solar panel, taking energy from the sun and feeding it back into the grid. The artists described it as a very direct and unambiguous approach to Public Art – it is not abstract or needing explanation. They envision students saying "Meet me at the R". The piece is made of stainless steel on top of a base of brick and granite. Students could sit on the base and power their laptops through outlets installed in the base. Alan works with steel castoffs and tempered glass in his sculptures. Past projects include sculptural work that recycles water from a green roof, etc. The R would be a mini-generator as well as a sculpture, combining art and science. The piece would be made of recycled materials. The panels would be perforated stainless steel so they could handle abuse. The artists could also use tempered glass and one-way bolts to increase durability. The solar converter box would be installed inside the base. The artists would only need to run conduit to a small utility space inside the building and they would like to run a line to the indoor rec room to offer a solar powered outlet there. Their plan for a wireless grid-tied solar inverter is described on the last page of their proposal. The watts the piece would generate are not huge – but the concept promotes the idea of renewability. The piece would utilize simple, straightforward technology and, with only four anchor bolts holding the R to the granite base, it also would use

straightforward engineering and construction techniques. The edges of the R would be trimmed with rolled steel, making the edges safe and not sharp and the steel itself is tougher than most building materials. There would be struts on top of the sculpture to handle any amount of weight (i.e. if the students were to climb on it). The perforations in the steel have moray patterns, creating a "rich little visual jewel". In thinking of the content of the piece, they started thinking about Rhode Island College, but came to like the open ended nature of the R – rethinking, redoing, renewal. The sculpture is an open form with negative space. The placement in the courtyard is somewhat flexible, with the consideration that the piece should be in a place that gets the most sunlight, avoids the shadow of the building, and it might be best to place it up against a sidewalk so the edges can be used as a bench.

Susan Cooper – Susan began her concept by considering the dynamic of public art in a public institution and felt that she wanted her piece to incorporate appropriate use of the site, appropriate materials, and the importance of higher education. John Malillo, a supplier of color kinetics for a company in Burlington, VT, attended the meeting to demonstrate the lighting mechanisms that would be used for her proposal. The fabricator would be Main Street Metals in Norwood, MA – all fulfilling the LEED specification for materials and fabrication within 500 miles. Susan presented the panel with an overview of past projects she has completed. She then described her positive experience as a college student living in a dorm and she

described how much she loved college and what an important experience it was for her. She feels a personal connection to this project and is committed to making it a success. She explained that art is about making connections such as science and art; people and work; ideas and actions. During our college years, our perspective is changed for the rest of our lives. Her theme for the proposal is learning. She explained that many aspects of life help us learn - we decide which questions to ask and as we find answers we open up new questions in an ongoing process of learning. Through questions and answers we enter a lifelong pattern of pursuing knowledge. She described the building itself as half of a hexagon resembling a theater – a stage with two side wings. She feels that the students are the actors and the building the stage – her artwork almost forms a set or backdrop and is appropriate for a school with a strong arts and theater program. On the exterior of the building she would install two light sculptures – one representing a question mark and one representing an exclamation mark. The lights could be programmed to create multiple colors and patterns.

On the inside stairwell she would install minimal, highly polished plaques that correlate to the light sculptures on the exterior – different themes for each side of the building. These plaques would be placed out of reach of the students and could be angled to reflect light. They would be embedded in surprising and unexpected places within the stairwells. Shapes and symbols on the exclamation mark side might include pi, the number sign, musical notes, the ampersand

(which connects one idea to another), infinity and words such as educate, move, compose, contrast, create, see think, wisdom, impact, knowledge, future, truth, etc. There would be questioning symbols on the question mark side and questioning words such as why, when, where, how, interpret, imagine, decipher, etc. Other buildings and departments of the university could contribute to these words and themes. If contingency funds are not completely used up by the proposal up to this point, she would install LED lights to reflect off the plaques. These could even be connected to motion sensors to be activated by students moving through the stairwell. The LED lights in the stairwell and comprising the outdoor sculptures will last about 23 years, are inexpensive, and can easily be changed. The LED lights on the exterior sculptures utilize 10 watts per linear feet and are solid state devices designed to go on the sides of skyscrapers. They are made in Burlington, VT although the company was recently purchased by Phillips Electronics whose sales office is in Boston. All equipment has a two year warranty. When the piece is not illuminated it would consist of white tubing on a black channel background. The installation would have four converter boxes that would be installed inside the building and connect to the piece via cables. The boxes are exterior rated, but will probably be installed inside.

Cork Marcheschi – Cork began by describing his early interest in light. He feels that it is a medium that creates an emotional response that is "pre-linguistic". He and his team fabricate all aspects of their light sculptures and installations in his Pacifica studio. They pack

and ship pieces and then install them on site. He presented the panel with a number of past pieces and installations. Some of these demonstrated his ability to work in challenging locations with difficult weather, wear, and tear. He has coated pieces in safety glass and created pigeon deterrents. He also described his fine art career, which is separate from his public art career, but also an important part of his work as an artist. He began his process for his RI College proposal by thinking about the logo – he saw it as a flame and felt hat it represented education, illumination, creativity, etc. He proposes creating a 22' tall aluminum, stainless steel and copper light statue with radiating and reflected dichroic lights. The flame at the top of the piece would be 5' tall and have enough dimension that the light reflecting off of it would shift as you walk around it. 8 50 watt MR16 lights would reflect at the top of the piece and 4 50 watt MR16 lights would reflect downward along the pole. He mentioned that he also had the idea to install a bas relief of the flame shape within the building itself, illuminated with LED lights. However, he settled on the sculptural piece and is confident that he can build and install it successfully. Setting the foundation for the piece is well within the budget, as well as the fabrication, shipping and installation of the piece.

Questions - The official colors of the school are blue and white, though burgundy was added in recent years. Could the colors of the piece be changed to reflect that? Yes, the colors could be anything. The flame shape is the constant and any colors reflected on it will still

be appropriate for the flame shape. When lights are not reflected on the flame, it will have the appearance of a multicolored brass patina.

Questions from the Panel:

The panel asked all of the artists how long it would take them to construct and install their proposed pieces and how disruptive to the school/dorm would the installation process be?
Cork: 6-7 months from signing of contract and all they would need is traffic cones to section off the area where they would be working.
Susan: 6 months from the signing of the contract – she would need two days to install on the exterior and about one day for the interior.
Alan and Phil: felt that they could have their piece built and installed within 2 months but they would be safe and say 6 months
Ben: could have the piece completed in 6 months and might need to close each stairwell for 3 full days, although since he'd primarily be working within the central space that might not be necessary.

All agreed it would be ideal if they could do their installation during a school break.

There are color themes for each floor represented in the stairwells. Did Ben take these into consideration for his proposal? He said he had thought about it, but hadn't come to a conclusion as to whether to tie his pieces into those color themes or not.

Is there a possibility that students could wedge themselves or other objects within the R sculpture? Alan and Phil replied that the negative spaces within the sculpture are too big for anyone to get wedged into.

Each artist was asked to describe the complexity of installation for their pieces, particularly for the electronic components of their proposals.
Susan's piece requires 120 volt run into the building that could easily be run through the exterior walls. The pieces would physically be anchor bolted to the exterior walls.

Cork's would need a minor run of 110 v into the building or to some other power source.

All artists agreed that the lighting aspects of their pieces could either be connected to sensors or could be connected to the building's overall lighting schedule. Susan's has a programming mechanism and Ben's could be on 24/7.

At 12:30 the artists left the meeting room and the panel began their closed discussion.

Two panelists immediately remarked that they were most impressed by Ben Phipps' presentation. They were impressed with his command of the technical aspects of his process and his advanced use of

recycled materials. One panelist commented that the relief sculptures that Susan proposed for the stairwell would be stolen no matter where they were installed. Students have stolen exit signs, elevators parts, etc., and this panelist had no doubt that these stairwell pieces would last no more than a year. The panel felt that the lighting in the stairwell of Ben's proposal would transform a very bland space and truly add something unique and enriching to the building. The panel also liked the randomness of the color patterns he proposed and felt that this abstract color patterning would integrate within the building better than the other proposals. The panel also appreciated that his proposal could be viewed from inside and outside of the building. There was disagreement among the panel concerning the proposal for the free standing pieces that Ben had proposed for the courtyard. The major concern was that they would be vandalized. Some panelists felt they were aesthetically successful while others felt they were not. Some felt that they were too static. They felt that his proposal for the interior stairwell could be protected by the existing wire mesh and would be less susceptible to vandalism. One panelist suggested that Ben be asked to create additional panels ahead of time to replace any that are vandalized over time. The panel acknowledged and appreciated that his materials are extremely durable.

The panel's biggest concern with Ben's proposal was the fire code issue. The architect/panelist who had communicated with Ben about this issue felt that he was "90 % there" as far as getting the Fire

Marshall's final approval. The panel was impressed that Ben was well-versed about the fire rating tests for his materials and they felt that he had already done a very impressive job in familiarizing himself with Rhode Island's fire codes and communicating with the Fire Marshall. The panel wanted to make sure that Ben keeps the tube lighting running consistently up the entire stairwell. However, they accepted the possibility that he might run light tubes up the middle of the piece rather than behind each panel if he needs to make any design revisions. They wanted to make sure, however, that the lighting effect is strong and dynamic.

The panel agreed that proposals for sculptures in the courtyard did not add to the beauty of the building. They were also not enthusiastic about the aesthetic quality of the exterior sculptural proposals. The panel was very impressed with each of the artists' presentations of their past works, but was not captivated by their proposals for the courtyard or exterior of the building. For Susan Cooper's proposal, the panel loved the lighting work she had done on other buildings, but they did not like the idea of the question mark and exclamation mark for the RIC building and felt that it would detract from, rather than enhance, the facade. They also worried about the fact that the lights have a two year warranty – they wondered what would happen if the piece developed technical problems after that. They felt that Ben's lighting elements could be more easily replaced.

Some panelists preferred Cork Marcheschi's bas relief proposal over

his sculptural proposal – but all felt that the use of the RIC logo was too literal and felt too much like a banner or a signpost.

Regarding Alan Binstock and Phil Napala's proposal, one panelist described disappointment that the solar tree they had seen in the original RFQ presentation became the R sculpture, which they did not find interesting in the same way. They also commented that the solar panel on the side of the R was "begging to be tampered with."

The panel again commented that they felt that Ben Phipps had made the best presentation. They liked his process for using recycled materials that would otherwise become landfill and that he had taken the time and effort to connect with local suppliers. They felt that he was well prepared and had predicted their questions and had answers for them. For the installation, he would likely get a lift for the interior of the cage. The panel did not like the idea of mounting his panels on the outside of the windows – if there were fire code issues - commenting that this would make the stairwell feel enclosed and claustrophobic. They wondered if he could drop a sprinkler down the central space of the stairwell to mitigate fire issues. The stairwells are cinderblock with steel - not highly flammable spaces. As long as his panels are inside the cage areas, the class A material should be fine. They felt that his pieces would become integral to the building. They had confidence that Ben would make a compelling presentation of his proposal to the Fire Marshall and Steve Hughes, the architect and College President Nazarian offered to attend that meeting to add

support to his presentation. The panel also appreciated that Ben would set up a studio in Rhode Island to fabricate his piece. They felt that, once here, he could make some decisions about how far to set the panels from the wire mesh and how much lighting to run behind the panels. They hoped that he would consult with the architect and the school on those decisions. The panel unanimously agreed that Ben's proposal would enhance the interior of the stairwells nicely and that the grid work would not interfere with his design.

All panelists voted in favor of Ben Phipps' proposal.

Cristina DiChiera commented that it could be a good programming opportunity to have Ben, as a young artist originally from Rhode Island, give a presentation to the RIC students regarding his process and his work as an up-and-coming artist. She expressed some concern that Ben inquired about any flexibility in the budget and she told the panel that she wanted to be sure that he had provided an adequate budget to see his project through. One panelist pointed out that there was no contingency fee in his budget and they also identified no artist's fee in the budget, suggesting that he must have wrapped it into the fabrication cost of the panels. The Arts Council will ensure that the issues related to the Fire Marshall and the budget are resolved and that those resolutions are reflected in the artist's contract.

Notes submitted by Cristina DiChiera 3/31/08